



The Asheville Downtown Association periodically surveys its members and the community to get feedback on issues and challenges facing downtown. We'll utilize this feedback to formulate the questions included in this survey.

The top issues noted in the survey for maintaining the vibrancy of downtown are: supporting local businesses, safety, more parking/transportation options, maintenance of infrastructure, addressing homelessness and affordable/workforce housing.

Downtown Issues Questionnaire for Mayoral Candidates

YOUR NAME Esther Manheimer

QUESTION: Please tell us why you are running for Mayor.

I love this place we all call home and I love and care about the people here. I am running for re-election as Mayor because I want to work to preserve what makes Asheville a special place. I want to continue serving our community, and specifically I am up for the challenge to strategically manage the pressures of growth, protect our community's resources from the whims of Raleigh and ensure that all voices are included in shaping our future.

QUESTION: What do you feel are downtown's most pressing challenges?

The breakneck growth and renewal of downtown has established Asheville as a stronger and somewhat more diverse economic engine for Western North Carolina, and has added urgency to the ongoing challenges of infrastructure needs, ensuring cleanliness and safety, and providing a better pedestrian experience.

QUESTION: What is the role of downtown in the greater Asheville community?

Downtown is the economic hub of Asheville as well as the surrounding communities. Thousands of people come downtown every day to work, receive services, shop, visit, and more. Downtown also forges an identity for our City and our community. At its best, downtown is welcoming, warmhearted, engaging, and uplifting—just like the people of Asheville.

QUESTION: What smart growth strategies and funding mechanisms would you employ to support thoughtful growth in downtown that increases the city's tax base while also maintaining its character?

I supported City Council's strategic focus on investing in downtown by designating it an Innovation District, which allows for cheaper, concentrated financing of needed improvements. I supported

the inclusion of Smart Growth strategies in the Downtown Master Plan and other planning tools. An important element of Smart Growth is to drive dense development in a downtown rather than creating urban sprawl. Density is proven to be better for our environment and encourages the liveliness and connection that we love about downtown: people outside walking, biking, and interacting.

ISSUE: Supporting local business

QUESTION: What strategies would you employ to ensure the sustainability of small locally owned businesses in downtown?

Locally owned businesses are the heart of downtown's uniqueness and the City must support policies and initiatives that will sustain our locally owned businesses. Last year, I supported City Council's approval and funding of a small business loan program. Implementation is pending while the City works to secure a third-party administrator and, we hope, partnership funding with the County.

ISSUE: Parking/Transportation

QUESTION: What improvements to our parking, transit system and alternative transportation options would you advocate for to ease pressure on the parking system?

I will continue to advocate for improvements to the transit system through a dedicated revenue stream, which is a concept I support and already have on the agenda for Council. In my seven and a half years on Council, we have aggressively funded transit improvements by adding extended hours, and Saturday and Sunday service. And this year we approved a new management contract with a new management company so that we can have them address deficiencies in service.

I will continue to advocate for fiscally sound methods of investing in additional parking infrastructure. During my service, the city built one City parking deck in downtown and funded improvements to the other downtown City parking decks. The City is currently exploring whether to fund additional downtown parking construction.

The City should explore expanding metered parking in locations such as the RAD, Biltmore Village and Biltmore Park. The City modernized metered parking by offering smart phone app payment as an option. We need to continue to review our metered parking portfolio--the revenues are used to offset the transit subsidy.

I also support public/private partnerships that address transportation and parking needs. We have approved the use of Slidr, a private alternative way to get around downtown.

ISSUE: Safety

QUESTION: How would you work with the police department to ensure adequate resources to maintain public safety? What strategies would you employ to address the concerns regarding policing brought forth during the recent budget conversation?

I supported Council's vote to increase the police department's budget, specifically to support the creation of a designated downtown police district and needed additional officers. This additional funding was in response to the Chief's concern about downtown safety both for residents and visitors.

At the same time, I made clear that I support a community conversation around policing and exploring ways to be serve and protect in a way that is fair and equitable for the whole community. Greater improvements are needed. One step I support is creating a Human Relations Commissions to help facilitate dialogue around policing and to serve as another forum for residents to voice concerns, show support and offer ideas.

Positive change is happening. The Chief recently worked with the group of residents to revise APD's use of force policies to incorporate de-escalation. We as a Council will review APD's data around traffic stops on a quarterly basis to ensure that policing is happening in a fair and equitable manner. And APD is improving its community policing program by requiring more boots on the ground and officers out in the community interacting with residents.

ISSUE: Infrastructure

QUESTION: Identify your top three downtown infrastructure needs. How would you prioritize funding for these projects and how do you feel infrastructure impacts business success?

Sidewalks are first because they are used by everyone, require upkeep, and their good repair is a necessity for safety in our busy downtown. Streets, including bike lanes, are second because they are the means for vehicles to reach downtown, and they seem to hold up longer than our sidewalks and therefore have a longer maintenance cycle. Parking is third, as it is a destination for vehicles and the private sector plays some role in providing this service (as opposed to streets and sidewalks).

Infrastructure can greatly impact business success. All downtown businesses would benefit from continuous sidewalks with curb cuts because that makes it easy for pedestrians, including people in wheelchairs, with strollers, or with hand trucks making deliveries. Beyond that, we need to be strategic with infrastructure decisions so that businesses are accessible.

ISSUE: Homelessness

QUESTION: What steps would you take to support the Homeless Initiative Advisory Committee's 5-year plan released earlier this year? What other strategies or initiatives would you consider to address homelessness in our community?

I am a practical person, but on some matters our hearts must inspire our actions. The homeless single adults with mental or physical illness who want to be healthy but don't have the resources, the parents whose children are doing their best to attend school and be good students while their moms and dads anguish over not just their futures but the immediate question of where will they sleep tonight--they all deserve better. I continue to support the Advisory Committee's work, particularly around the Housing First Model, which is shown to deliver the best outcomes. I led the push for the voter-supported bond measure that will put \$25 million more toward Affordable Housing, including innovative plans for permanent housing. People fall into homelessness when they cannot find affordable housing—that's the connection.

ISSUE: Affordable/Workforce Housing

QUESTION: What is your position on housing diversity in downtown? How would you direct staff to utilize funds from the recently passed Affordable Housing Bond? What other strategies would you like to see our city develop to address the affordability issue?

Downtown would benefit from having more housing for the people who work in its shops, restaurants, and hotels. The proximity would reduce their cost of living and our downtown would be more vibrant with their presence. Regarding the bond money, staff has been holding community meetings for months in order to share concepts, collect input from residents, and request more ideas and community leadership before we take next steps. The focus areas are: City-owned land for development of rental units, increasing the Trust Fund that incentivizes and makes loans to developers, and permanently affordable homeownership through land trusts and housing cooperatives. For downtown, all three approaches could be a good fit. I have advocated for Affordability for a long time, and I support the innovation and the dialogue. As far as other strategies, as I have said before, we need to preserve housing units for our residents throughout our city so we do not become a beach town, where every home is a short term rental.

What is your 5-year vision for Downtown?

My vision is that we can and we must build a community that is even more connected, more fair, more resilient, and more livable—throughout Asheville. I anticipate that growth and redevelopment will continue in the downtown and therefore the role of Council is to guide strategic growth. As an example, Council has identified the South Slope as an opportunity to create more economic development in the downtown and therefore designated the South Slope as an innovation district where the City can focus investment in infrastructure. Within the next five years I envision city and community partnerships that result in more affordable housing units and more minority-owned businesses; enhanced multimodal infrastructure including adapting pedestrian infrastructure for handicap access; supporting the Task Force’s vision for the Haywood Street Property; continued park improvements; long-term planning for the Thomas Wolfe auditorium remodel; and continued implementation of the Downtown Master Plan including the rule change requiring Council’s review of all new proposed hotels.

Any further comments you’d like to include concerning Downtown Asheville?

There is much more opportunity and work ahead, especially to preserve Asheville for those who live here, while creating equity and supporting a vibrant economy. Downtown must withstand a daily population swell of many thousands of additional people, and every elected Asheville official must work to balance livability with the pressures of growth and increased tourism. I appreciate the work of the Downtown Association. We need you and we need more people willing to participate in the messy but necessary processes of making our downtown and our entire City the best it can be.